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JRNL 170.03: Elements of News Writing

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JRNL 170/Elements of News Writing

Section 3, 10-10:50 a.m., DAH 004

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Office hours: 11 a.m.-noon, Monday, Wednesday and Friday; Tuesday and Thursday by appointment. Please visit me if you have any questions.

Introduction

Journalistic writing is unlike any other. It has a particular style that emphasizes clarity and an economy of words. It is active in voice and vivid in detail. The best of it sounds conversational but is always grounded in good grammar and impeccable style.

Successful students in this course will learn the fundamentals of news writing, from commas to captions, from what makes news to how facts are shaped into a readable story, from the correct handling of quotations to the proper use of semicolons, from The Associated Press' rules on ages (always a numeral, unless it starts the sentence) to its insistence that Xerox is never a verb. Ideally, as a result of this course, you will spend the rest of your lives flinching at misspelled menus and ungrammatical instructions.

Course Outcomes

By the end of this course, successful students have:

- Sharpened their news judgment.
- Honed their grammar, usage and punctuation skills.
- Explored AP style and learned how to use the AP Stylebook as a resource.
- Identified and written news stories in online, print and broadcast formats.
- Developed "an ear" for good quotations and learned to use them effectively.
- Written captions that went beyond the obvious.
- Crafted headlines that reflected the essence and tone of news stories.

How to Succeed

We'll gauge your progress through frequent exercises, assignments and quizzes on the news and points of grammar and style. In fact, every class features a quiz or exercise, which means you need to attend every class.

It also means you need to follow the news. Be prepared to discuss what's happening globally and locally. Start consuming news sources, including the Missoulian, Montana Kaimin, Montana Public Radio and national/international news organizations like The New York Times, the Washington Post, BBC, CNN. Follow good journalists on social media.

Attendance Requirements

Did I mention you must attend every class? This class will be treated like a journalism job. Late to class is late to work. A working reporter who shows up late to a story gets beaten on that story. You won't be allowed to make up the work you miss due to an unexcused absence, and you can't get an unexcused absence without permission from the instructor beforehand. Good excuses include illness and death, and that's about it. Missing class will affect (not "effect," by the way) your grade.

Building Access

For after-hours access to Don Anderson Hall, please complete and submit the [after-hours access form](#) by Friday, Feb. 3.

Complete only one request form per semester. Be sure to list all courses you are taking. Codes will remain active until the final day of the semester. Students who failed to file forms not submitted by the deadline will not have access – no exceptions.

Required Reading

- "News Reporting and Writing" by the Missouri Group, 11th Edition. To give you some options for savings, you can buy the text online as either a textbook or an e-book, or you can rent the e-book for the semester.
- AP Stylebook. If you are logged into a University computer, you can access the online version at http://www.apstylebook.com/umontana_edu/, but if you're really serious about journalism, I encourage you to buy a hard copy for about \$20, or an online subscription at <http://www.apstylebook.com/>.

No Double-Dipping

You may not submit for this course any assignment that has previously or will be concurrently submitted for another class unless you receive advanced approval from the professor of this course. Doing so without permission will result in an F for the assignment, and could also result in an F for the course.

Accommodation for Students with Disabilities

This course is accessible to otherwise qualified students with disabilities. To request reasonable program modifications, please consult with the instructor. [Disability Services for Students](#) will assist the instructor and student in the accommodation process.

Academic Honesty

All students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or disciplinary sanction by the University. All students need to be familiar with the [Student Conduct Code](#).

Plagiarism

As a reporter, it can cost you your career. As a journalism student, it will cost you the course. Don't represent another person's words, ideas, data or materials as your own. Any case of plagiarism in this course will be subject to the penalties outlined in the Student Conduct Code. In addition, made-up facts, made-up people presented as journalism are grounds for immediate failure.

Grading

- Participation, attendance and quizzes: 20 percent
- Writing assignments: 50 percent
- Midterm exam: 15 percent
- Final assessment: 15 percent

Grades are based on a 100-percent scale and will use the following plus/minus system. Letter grades are not used for individual assignments, although the final grade (per requirement) is given as a letter grade. The equivalents are:

- 90-100 percent: A
- 80-89 percent: B
- 70-79 percent: C
- 60-69 percent: D
- 0-59 percent: F

My plus/minus system also makes the following distinctions:

- A+: 97-100 percent
- A: 93-96 percent
- A-: 90-92
- B+: 87-89 percent
- B: 83-86 percent
- B-: 80-82 percent
- C+: 77-79 percent
- C: 73-76 percent
- C-: 70-72 percent
- D+: 67-69 percent
- D: 63-66 percent
- D-: 60-62 percent
- F: Below 60 percent

Other grading notes:

- A 70/C- is the minimum passing grade for journalism classes. You will not receive credit toward the requirements of a journalism degree if you earn lower than 70/C in this course.

- Missed deadlines aren't an option in this class or in journalism. Expect to receive a zero on any assignment you fail to hand in by the deadline. Your course grade can't survive many zeroes.

Course Schedule

Week 1 – What's news? I'll provide an overview of the course, and we'll begin by discussing what makes something newsworthy. We'll look at journalistic writing to see how it's different from other kinds of writing. We consider different types of news stories, examine their elements, and learn what they're called. We'll prep for quizzes on news, punctuation, grammar and style.

Week 2 – We'll critique your first stories, focusing on your news judgment and journalistic style, which values accuracy, clarity and brevity and depends on vivid language and precise grammar, punctuation and spelling. We'll distinguish between writing news and writing commentary.

Week 3 – We'll take a closer look at the beginning sentences of news stories. Journalists call them leads (or ledes). We'll study different approaches to writing leads for basic news stories, many of which depend on which aspect of the story is most newsworthy.

Week 4 – We'll write some more leads, and discuss how to write the rest of a basic story. We'll look at how good news writers end their stories.

Week 5 – Recognizing good quotations and using them well is a hallmark of good reporting. We'll study what makes a good quote, and how to handle its attribution and punctuation. We'll write a basic news story that includes quotes.

Week 6 – Note-taking is an essential skill, so we'll show you some strategies for doing that. We'll test your ability with some skill-building exercises. We'll also look at some of the most commonly misused or confused words and phrases. Expect a quiz on that.

Week 7 – We'll learn to write a short feature and developing story. We'll review for the midterm, which will be an objective, comprehensive exam covering topics explored so far.

Week 8 – I'll give you a midterm this week.

Week 9 – Spring Break.

Week 10 – We'll read a few good feature stories and dissect them. You'll see how great writers use descriptive detail to make their readers see, hear or even smell their subjects. You'll explore story structure and literacy tricks to keep a narrative galloping along to the finish.

Week 11 – We will write a short feature based on in-class interviews to assess what you've learned about feature writing.

Week 12 – We'll prepare to cover an out-of-class event, the Dean Stone Lecture with Nikole Hannah-Jones at 7 p.m. Wednesday, April 12, in the University Center Ballroom.

Week 13 – Increasingly, all journalists must craft captions to explain their photos and draw attention to the accompanying stories. We'll introduce you to the art and conventions of writing accurate headlines that get noticed and clicked on.

Week 14 – I'll introduce you to writing for the ear and the eye, and show you the rudiments of broadcast style. We'll practice by transforming short, hard news and feature stories for online and print outlet into scripts for radio and television.

Week 15 – We'll wrap up our introduction to broadcast writing by writing some final short pieces. We'll review for a final assessment based on the midterm.